

The fortunes of the House of Atreus form the noblest of all legends. I believe in that destiny before which the ancients bowed. Modern philosophy, with its superficial discoveries, has infused into the breast of man a spirit of scepticism; but I think that, ere long, science will again become imaginative, and that as we become more profound, we may become also more credulous. Destiny is our will, and our will is our nature. . . . All is mystery, but he is a slave who will not struggle to penetrate the dark veil.<sup>1</sup>

In the legend of the House of Atreus and the tragic idea of destiny that underlies it we are in touch with the Oriental background of Hellenic civilisation, and here Disraeli is at home. Within sight of the Parthenon his thoughts are still turned towards the East. 'In art the Greeks were the children of the Egyptians,' observes Contarini, and there was more originality in the observation in those days than there would be in ours. But Athens stands for literature as well as art, and presently the memory of early sufferings from grammar and lexicon supervenes. 'The Greeks, who were masters of composition, were ignorant of all languages but their own.' Now that every nation has in its own tongue a record of all knowledge, let education be confined to the national literature. To the few who have leisure or inclination to study foreign literatures he would say, 'Why not study the Oriental? Surely in the pages of the Persians and the Arabs we might discover new sources of emotion, new modes of expression, new trains of ideas, new principles of invention, and new bursts of fancy.' These are Contarini's 'meditations amid the ruins of Athens'; these and one of those defiant outbursts of racial scorn for the Northern barbarians among whom he lived, which became more frequent with Disraeli at a later date: —

With horror I remember that, through some mysterious necessity, civilisation seems to have deserted the most

<sup>1</sup> *Contarini Fleming*, PL V. ch. 18.